

U.S. Support for Anti-Soviet and Anti-Russian Guerrilla Movements and the Undermining of Democracy

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The U.S. government has demanded that nations and international bodies join forces to combat terrorism. Yet the United States has played an important role in fostering the very terrorism it now denounces. While terrorist groups are portrayed as an “evil enemies” by the United States, many terrorist organizations initially received considerable support from the U.S. government, either openly or clandestinely. From the Mujihadeen in Afghanistan to the Kosovo Liberation Army in the former Yugoslavia, the U.S. government has provided training and support to “terrorist” organizations. One of the best ways to combat terrorism in the world today is to pressure the United States and other governments to stop lending support to such organizations.

This is of particular importance for Russia, since terrorists originally armed and trained by the United States battled Soviet forces for over a decade in Afghanistan, and these Mujihadeen fighters can now be found in the Russian region of Chechnya. Not only has the U.S. support for the Mujihadeen resulted in considerable bloodshed in Chechnya, but the Soviet Union’s war in Afghanistan and the Russian Federation’s war in Chechnya served to undermine efforts at democratization. My principal thesis in this article is that democracy cannot be instituted during war or under wartime conditions. In the United States own history, the periods when democracy was most threatened occurred during wartime. During the American Civil War, for example, many civil liberties were suspended. During World War I this was also the case, and right after the war the first “Red Scare” was instituted. World War II also saw strict limits on democratic rights, limitations that were repeated during the Viet Nam war.¹

Of course in the history of Russia it has been during wartime that rights were most vigorously curtailed. During World War I no opposition voices were allowed, and with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1918 both the Reds and the Whites insti-

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tuted a reign of terror that was justified by the reality of war. It was the threat of war that gave Stalin the excuse he needed to purge the Soviet Union of all of his opponents in the 1930s, and it was the cold war that gave Soviet leaders the justification for preventing democracy from breaking out. Thus, democracy cannot coexist alongside war, and from 1979 to the present, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation have been bogged down in conflicts in Afghanistan and Chechnya—conflicts in which the United States has played a considerable role.

In the 1980s, the Soviet war in Afghanistan served to counteract the push toward democratization, since this war was used as an excuse for state control of speech and press freedoms. Currently, the presence of “terrorists” in Chechnya is undermining Russia’s efforts to institute democratic reforms in the country, while at the same time the Chechen conflict has tended to empower antidemocratic forces. Under the umbrella of fighting terrorism, the Russian government justifies the violation of basic civil rights of Russian citizens, whether Chechens or one of the many other nationalities within the Russian Federation.

In this article I will explore the ways that the United States has contributed to the spread of terrorism as it concerns the former Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. The U.S. role has been twofold; first, in its material support of terrorist groups, and second, by the example set in using extreme violence to achieve ends. From there I will explore the ways in which these U.S.-trained terrorists have played a significant role in Russia’s conflict with Chechnya.

The model for state-sponsored terrorism is the U.S. role in arming, training, and supporting the Mujihadeen “freedom fighters” of Afghanistan in the 1980s. From this guerrilla movement, initially intended to oust the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, arose terrorist groups in nations such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Chechnya, and the former Yugoslavia.² Later, some of the Afghan-trained “freedom fighters” were involved in terrorist acts against the United States, the very government that had given them support in the early days of their organization. The initial bombing of the World Trade Center in 1992, the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the attack on the USS *Cole*, and the attacks of 11 September all have been linked to individuals and groups that at one time were armed and trained by the United States and/or its allies.³

And while the United States has given strong logistical support to terrorist movements, it also provided terrorists with the moral justification for their acts. For example, neither Iraq nor Libya ever attacked the United States, yet the U.S. government believes it was justified in attacking those two countries. So too with the missile attacks on Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998. While neither Afghanistan nor Sudan attacked the United States, President Clinton argued that the United States had the right to launch missile attacks against them. As former Pakistani interior minister Naseer Ullah Babar described the missile attacks, “[t]his is American gangsterism.”⁴

The attacks on Iraq and Libya were considered successful actions by the United States, but the attacks also provided the justification that Ramsi Yousef, the mastermind of the first World Trade Center attack, needed to carry out the bombings in 1993. According to John Parachini

Yousef justified his terrorism as both punishment and revenge. Since the United States never learns, he argued, it must be punished. Yousef equated the U.S. punishment inflicted on Libyan and Iraqi civilians with the punishment he had dispensed: "the United States is applying the system of collective punishment against Iraq and Libya—when either government makes any mistake, the United States punishes the people in their entirety for the government's mistake. We are reciprocating the treatment."⁵

It might be argued that, despite past mistakes, the U.S. government has now seen the error of its ways and has cut off support for terrorist organizations. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In Afghanistan, for example, the United States supports a revitalized version of the Northern Alliance, a guerrilla terrorist organization that counts among its members some of the most brutal individuals in the world today. The United States currently occupies Afghanistan and is working to build a new Afghan army, which will certainly infuse even more money, arms, training, and equipment into a region that is already one of the most heavily armed and violent places on earth. A recent Associated Press article confirmed what is widely known; that the U.S. military is giving arms and ammunition to key warlords in Afghanistan, a practice that will likely lead to the use of those weapons against the very people and groups the United States is sworn to protect.⁶

Even more recently the Pentagon announced that it has allocated \$5 million to train Iraqi opponents of Saddam Hussein to fight in a possible invasion of Iraq. This training is reminiscent of the earlier U.S. training of Mujihadeen guerrilla fighters, and could potentially have similar consequences.⁷ Thus, even today U.S. arms are used by terrorist organizations worldwide.

U.S. support of the Mujahideen actually began even prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. While it is widely believed, and officially reported, that U.S. support for the Mujahideen was a response to the Soviet invasion in 1979, former Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski admitted otherwise in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1998. In the interview he declared that

[a]ccording to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahideen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise: Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.⁸

Brzezinski defended his actions to the reporter, and declared at one point that the "secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap, and you want me to regret it?"⁹

The actions of the Carter administration and Secretary Brzezinski can only be seen as an act of ruthless cynicism, because the Carter administration gave support to a violent movement led by Moslem fundamentalists, a group that has little in common with the ideals of the U.S. government and its people. By contrast, the Soviets gave support to the Afghan communist and noncommunist Left, that is, groups that shared the Soviet perspective on domestic and international issues. But the alliance of the Mujahideen and the United States was not rooted in any

common values or perspectives, only the overriding desire to destroy the Soviet Union.

Certainly Moslem fundamentalists could see the cracks in this unnatural alliance. As Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman, the Egyptian cleric who was convicted in the conspiracy to bomb the World Trade Center in 1993, put it in an interview in 1997,

Do you think we were naive enough to believe that the United States government was helping the Afghans because it believed in their cause—to raise the flag of jihad for Islam? That they were helping a people, a country, to free themselves? Absolutely not. The Americans were there to punish the Soviet Union.¹⁰

In his article on U.S. support of the Mujihadeen, Phil Gaspar writes:

Between 1982 and 1992, some 35,000 Muslim radicals from 43 Islamic countries in the Middle East, North and East Africa, Central Asia and the Far East would pass their baptism under fire with the Afghan mujahideen. Tens of thousands more foreign Muslim radicals came to study in the hundreds of new madrassas [religious schools] that Zia's military government began to fund in Pakistan and along the Afghan border. Eventually more than 100,000 Muslim radicals were to have direct contact with Pakistan and Afghanistan and be influenced by the jihad [against the USSR].¹¹

In the 1980s the Reagan administration believed that supporting Moslem fundamentalists was the best way to fight communism and socialism in predominately Moslem countries. It was reasoned that while secular movements of national liberation, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization, embraced socialism, Moslem fundamentalists were vehemently anticommunist and antisocialist. In addition, support for Moslem fundamentalist groups was looked upon with favor by Saudi Arabia, the key U.S. ally in the Gulf region. And the Saudi regime, like the United States, disliked the strong socialist content of most modern Arab movements. What better way to undermine both the Soviet Union and Arab and Moslem socialism than to give support to Moslem religious fanatics? Such was the cynical reasoning of the U.S. government in the 1980s.

To that end the United States encouraged Moslem fundamentalists from around the world to join the Mujahideen in their fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The very reason that Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman was allowed into the United States, despite his known ties to Moslem extremist groups in Egypt and Afghanistan, was to help recruit American Moslems to fight the jihad in Afghanistan.¹² Later convicted for his role in the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, Rahman was permitted to live in the United States to recruit soldiers to fight the jihad. Rahman did his job, but when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, he set his sights on other targets. Now in the United States, a veteran of the jihad in Afghanistan, Rahman and his followers focused their efforts on the other "Great Satan," the United States.

And even after the ouster of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, the United States continued to play a role in fostering Moslem fundamentalism. Although the United States has been attacked for abandoning Afghanistan after the departure of the Soviet Union, the United States and its Pakistani and Saudi allies con-

tinued to exert influence in the region. Indeed, initial support for the Taliban was from the Pakistani government, which in turn was given approval from the United States.¹³ It was only when the Taliban had taken control of Kabul and when Osama bin Laden had taken refuge in Afghanistan that the United States began to withdraw its support for this fundamentalist regime.

With the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, many jihad soldiers returned to their home countries to pick up the fight they left in Afghanistan. In Algeria, for instance, the Islamic Salvation Front has engaged in a bloody civil war with the government, and many of its key members are veterans of the Afghan war. This is also the case in the former Yugoslavia and in Chechnya, where key fighters gained their training and experience during the U.S.-backed jihad in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Of course the best known byproduct of the Afghan jihad is Osama bin Laden. Although the U.S. government claims that there is no direct link between bin Laden and the United States, there is no doubt that the United States provided a favorable environment for

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bin Laden to build his reputation and following. It is difficult to believe that the United States played no role in the operations of the son of one of the wealthiest men in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, it is much more likely that the United States knew full-well of bin Laden's operation and gave it all the support they could. It was well-known in the Moslem and Arab world that the United States preferred the type of work that bin Laden engaged in; rather than getting money directly from the United States or some other government, bin Laden had enough cash to run his own operation. This fit well with the U.S. government's own belief that wealthy individuals, not the state, should step forward and, in an act of charity and volunteerism, provide the necessary funds and support for a worthy cause. Bin Laden's actions in Afghanistan fit well within the U.S. government's concept of a “worthy cause,” and so he was allowed to work to train and to recruit his following.

Once the Mujihadeen's war with the Soviet Union was through, its members turned their attention to other enemies. This was especially true in Chechnya, where former Mujihadeen fighters joined forces with Chechen rebels battling the Russian army for control of the region. Beginning in 1993, former Mujihadeen fighters were known to be operating in Chechnya, while the Pakistani secret police, the ISI, was training fighters in camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan to fight in the Caucasus region. In June 1995, the Chechen leader Shamil Basayev led a raid on the Russian town of Budennovsk, and his force included fighters from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, all of whom had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets.¹⁵

And from the civil war in Afghanistan came one of the most feared and ruthless of the Chechen fighters, the "Arab" Kattab. Born in the border region between Saudi Arabia and Jordan, Kattab fought with the Mujihadeen in Afghanistan as an Afghan Arab, and he later went to Chechnya to continue his religious war against the Russians.¹⁶ As recently as January 2002, Kattab was identified in a videotape with Osama bin Laden, thereby underscoring the link between bin Laden and the Chechen fighters. Although of Arab origin, Kattab spoke fluent Russian on the videotape, underscoring his long contact with Russian speaking Chechens.¹⁷ Although Kattab has since been proclaimed dead by Russian authorities, he is only one example of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of non-Chechens fighting in Chechnya with the skills they acquired from the United States or U.S.-backed groups in their fight against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

Since the CIA conducted its operations in Afghanistan through the Pakistani government and secret police, it is difficult to document who received training and support directly from the United States, and who was trained by U.S.-backed interests but presumably without the direct knowledge of the United States. The U.S. government has denied any contact or support for Osama bin Laden, for example, and since no direct evidence has surfaced linking bin Laden directly with the CIA, the U.S. government has maintained this (highly unlikely) position. But what cannot be refuted is the use of U.S.-produced Stinger missiles in Chechnya, missiles from the conflict in Afghanistan. Not only were Stingers from the Afghan war used in Chechnya, but the United States has unwisely given Stinger missiles to nations such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, two nations where there is strong support for the Chechen fighters.¹⁸

Thus, in both training and the supply of arms, the United States and its backers have played a strong role in the conflicts in both Afghanistan and Chechnya and thus in undermining the democratic process in Russia. In the 1980s, while then-Soviet premier Gorbachev was attempting to reform Soviet politics and society, a futile conflict in Afghanistan made his efforts all the more difficult. And while Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union has made cautious steps toward greater freedom and democracy, this too has been undermined by the ongoing war in Chechnya. Although there is no hard evidence that the United States is directly supporting Chechen "terrorists," there is no doubt that the United States and/or its allies did train fighters who are now in Chechnya fighting the Russian army. And there is considerable evidence that nations such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, two close U.S. allies, have given aid and support to Chechen fighters.

In sum, U.S. policies since 1979 have served to strengthen the very "terrorism" it claims to oppose. In supporting the Mujihadeen in Afghanistan, the United States helped push the Soviet Union into the "Afghan trap," as Zbigniew Brzezinski put it, and therefore helped to undermine the possibility of a democratic opening in the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, those same terrorists have relocated to Chechnya, where the war continues to weaken the hoped-for democracy in the newly formed Russian Federation. It is only by halting support for these terrorists groups that the United States can help create

an environment in Russia that would encourage rather than discourage the growth of democracy. While the United States might technically claim it is not responsible for supporting and training terrorists in Chechnya, it certainly helped to contribute to the current conflict by its role in the Afghan war of 1979–92. Additionally, the United States continues to support Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, two nations that have been known to give aid and support to Chechen rebels. As long as this conflict continues, there will be no hope for greater democracy in Russia.

Notes

1. For example, in 1917 the U.S. Congress passed the Espionage Act, which prohibited any “talk or writing that would lead to the refusal of duty in the armed forces.” The provisions of the Espionage Act were intended for times of war only, but in 1940, before the United States entered World War II, the U.S. Congress passed the Smith Act, which allowed for the enforcement of the Espionage Act during peacetime. The Smith Act also “made it a crime to advocate the overthrow of the government by force or violence, or join any group that advocated this, or publish anything with such ideas.” In 1943, eighteen members of the Socialist Workers Party were found in violation of the Smith Act for advocating that their members resist service in the U.S. military, and they were sentenced to prison terms. Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 49. During the Vietnam War, the principal reason behind the actions of the FBI’s and CIA’s secret COINTELPRO (counterintelligence program) operations was the growing opposition to the war and the belief on the part of the government that such opposition was not permissible during wartime. *Ibid.*, 165–230.

2. John K. Cooley’s excellent book, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America, and International Terrorism* (New York: Pluto Press, 2000) provides a compelling argument that the Carter administration’s cynical policy of giving support to Moslem fundamentalists gave rise to the Mujihadeen in Afghanistan, a support that in turn gave rise to a number of terrorist organizations around the world.

3. Cooley, *Unholy Wars*, notes that the perpetrators of the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993 used a manual written by the CIA for the Mujihadeen fighters in Afghanistan on how to make explosives. Cooley also notes that Sheik Abul Rahman, one of the conspirators in this bombing, was allowed to come to the United States to recruit Arab-Americans to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviets.

4. Paul Wiseman, “Missiles Hit Sudan, Afghanistan” *USA Today*, 25 August 1998.

5. John V. Parachini, “The World Trade Center Bombers (1993),” in *Toxic Terror: Assessing Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons*. Jonathan B. Tucker, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 185–206.

6. Chris Hawley, “Afghan Warlords Receive U.S. Weapons,” Associated Press, 16 October 2002.

7. Pauline Jelinek, “Pentagon to Train Iraqi Opponents,” Associated Press, 20 October 2002.

8. Brzezinski interview in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15–21 January 1998, 76.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Mary Anne Weaver, “Blowback,” *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1996).

11. Phil Gaspar, “Afghanistan, the CIA, bin Laden, and the Taliban,” *International Socialist Review* (November–December 2001).

12. Anne Weaver, “Blowback.”

13. See Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) for an excellent account of the support the United States gave to the early development of the Taliban.

14. John K. Cooley’s *Unholy Wars* provides details on the links between the Afghan veterans and Islamic fundamentalist groups in North Africa, the Middle East, the former

Yugoslavia, and Chechnya.

15. Yossef Bodansky, "Chechnya, The *Mujahedin* Factor," <<http://www.freeman.org>>.

16. Ibid.

17. Matthew McAllester, "The Chechen Connection," *Newsday*, 20 January 2002

18. Ken Silverstein, "Stingers, Stingers, Who's Got the Stingers?" *Slate*, 2 October 2001.